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ABSTRACT

There is a need for a common educational core to satisfy the requirements for reproducing a democratic society. Although historically the common schools were couched in the rhetoric of a common educational experience, democratic localism tended to undermine the commonality through a large number of antidemocratic practices. However, recent decades have witnessed successful attacks on many of these practices, leading to greater equity and homogeneity of the publc schools. This success in overturning some of the aspects of schools that undermine democracy and in creating greater uniformity in education has stimulated new searches for greater choice and influence in education. There are numerous public policy options that would increase parental and student choice within the common educational experience required to meet the social goals of schooling in a democratic society. Finally, there are intrinsic obstacles to using such private choice mechanisms as tuition tax credits and educational vouchers for addressing simultaneously both the social purposes of schooling and private educational choice. (Author/MLF)



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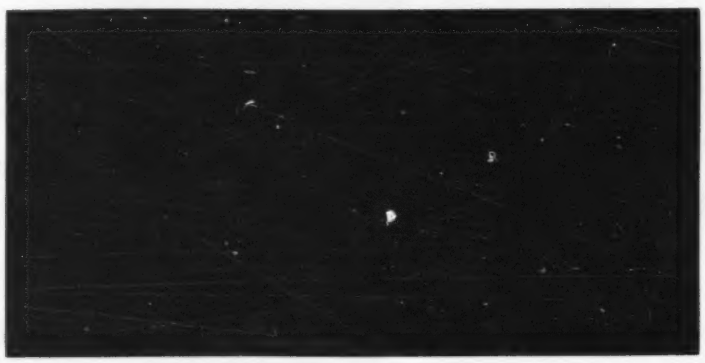

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# EDUCATIONAL CHOICE AND THE PAINS OF DEMOCRACY

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## Abstract

This essay makes the following contentions: First, there must necessarily be a tension between common schooling in the service of democracy and individual educational choice in the service of private goals. Second, there is a need for a common educational core to satisfy the requirements for reproducing a democratic society. Third, although historically the common schools were couched in the rhetoric of a common educational experience, democratic localism tended to undermine the commonality through a large number of anti-democratic practices. Fourth, recent decades have witnessed successful attacks on many of these practices, leading to greater equity and homogeneity in the public schools. Fifth, this success in overturning some aspects of schools that undermine democracy and in creating greater uniformity in education has stimulated new searches for greater choice and influence in education by those who have traditionally had these options. Finally, there are numerous policy options that would increase parental and student choice within the common educational experience required to meet the social goals of schooling in a democratic society.

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Throughout most of their history, the public schools of the United States have varied systematically in the educational experiences offered their students. Such characteristics as the race, social class, wealth, religion, and political philosophy of the populations that were served were translated into schooling of a unique character that reflected these influences. During the last thirty years, the courts and legislatures intervened to more nearly equalize educational opportunities and democratize the educational experience shared by youngsters from different backgrounds. This movement succeeded to such an extent, that the rallying cry of the eighties has become that of expanding educational choice rather than reducing it. Of particular salience are such proposals as tuition tax credits and educational vouchers that would expand choice by providing public subsidies for students enrolled in private schools.

The purpose of this essay is to consider more fully the nature of choice in education and the consequences of different choice arrangements, for it is only within this framework that the attributes of current initiatives like tuition tax credits and vouchers can best be understood. First, I will identify the tensions between choice and common schooling in a democratic society. Second, I will demonstrate

the connection between the restriction of differences in the public schools and the increasing pressure for private alternatives. Third, I will indicate a range of choice mechanisms that are far more extensive than just those associated with tax credits and vouchers. The overriding theme will be that the challenge to expand educational choice must be reconciled with the democratic purposes of schooling in American society.

## CHOICE AND COMMON SCHOOLS

Private schools preceeded public schools historically in virtually every industrialized country including the United States. Under a system of private schools, those who had the resources and desires to provide formal education for their children could do so at their own expense. The type of school and the nature of the schooling experience was a function of parental choice, and parents also had the choice of not providing formal schooling for their children. That is, formal education was similar to other goods and services based upon the quest for profits or the goal of reproducing religious, political, or other group values and characteristics, and there was a demand based upon the economic, social, political, religious, and cultural value of education to students and their families. Families with adequate resources and with preferences for schooling sought out schools for their children that best met their perceived needs relative to costs.

Under such a system of private access to schools, there were few problems as long as schooling was not a requisite for full membership in

the social, political, and economic life of the nation. In colonial America, work roles required training in the form of apprenticeships and learning-by-doing; but only the learned professions required formal schooling. The typical occupations of farming, artisan work, and commercial activity could be learned readily by attaching oneself to these types of endeavors without anything but the rudiments of literacy. Likewise, the existence of a rapidly expanding economy and frontier meant that the opportunities for economic gain and social mobility did not require schooling as much as imagination, entrepreneurship, and hard work. Further, to the degree that government was minimal and government decisions were primarily local ones that would invite the participation of all in town meetings, one could easily become educated through direct involvement about the major public issues of the day.

But, the history of nineteenth century America was one of a remarkable transformation characterized by massive immigrations, urbanization and industrialization, and an increasing shift from local political issues to regional and national ones.[1] It has been argued that it was these dramatic changes in American life with their attendant requirements for a common educational experience that set the stage for the establishment and expansion of common schools (Cremin 1951; Butts 1978). In these respects, the common school responded to a need to provide benefits to society beyond those conferred to individual students and their families. The teaching of a common set of values, common language, common political practices, behavior for a relatively uniform social system of production, and so on, expanded both the

potential and actual performance of the nation with respect to its economic growth, effective democratic governance, access of all individuals to opportunity, unity of social purpose, and the formation of a nation-state of emerging importance in the world order.

Clearly, the shift from an education with primarily private implications to one with important consequences and benefits for the entire society required exposure to a common educational experience that promised to confer these benefits.[2] What were some of the dimensions of this common experience and their relation to the American social, economic, and political entity? Surely, students must learn that we are a nation of laws that entail both rights and obligations for all citizens; that there exist political processes for resolving public conflict; that participation in such political processes requires knowledge of issues and exposure to other points of view, as well as discourse; and that ultimately one must act on one's political views through voting for representatives or through more direct forms of political participation.

They must learn a common language that can be fully understood and used for social, cultural, and commercial intercourse throughout the Republic. This does not mean the exclusion of other languages as much as it means the affirmation that a single language will be the official one that will be used widely and that will be assumed to be known by all citizens. Literacy in that language will include the ability to read, write, speak, and understand it in its daily use in the political, social, and economic arenas. In addition, literacy in scientific and

arithmetic skills as required in daily life for effective participation in society is also a necessity, as well as the knowledge of music and the arts that contribute to the full development of a social entity. Finally, common schooling meant learning the dominant forms of work and work organizations as well as the requirements for participating in those organizations. In a modern capitalist economy, they must learn the nature of property rights and rights of the worker, including those of collective bargaining. Further, they must understand the principles of hierarchy and supervision, division of labor, labor markets, wages and salaries, consumption and saving, and so on.[3]

Thus, the notion of the common school was predicated more on unity and uniformity than on choice. Indeed, if families had been left to their own choices about schooling, the common experience that was considered to be so crucial to the development of the nation would have been lost. Some persons would not have been able to obtain schooling for their children at all; others would have sought schooling that reinforced narrow religious, political, ethnic, or cultural ends; and others yet would have found schooling for their offspring that would have set them apart through elite practices. Schooling would have been sought for its limited "private" benefits as perceived by families considering only their own personal interests rather than those of the larger society. Accordingly, the concept of the common school required compulsory participation in an institution that provided a shared experience, rather than one based upon more parochial factors of choice.

But, this basic paradox created an enormous tension between the quest for commonality and uniformity in education on the one hand, and choice on the other. In most daily activities, families and individuals are able to satisfy their desires through choice and exit (Hirschman 1970). If one finds a more preferable alternative to a present activity, he or she can exit from one activity to the other. The premise of choice is one that underlies the use of markets to satisfy needs. Consumers seek the best alternative in terms of satisfaction and price. Suppliers attempt to meet the needs of consumers by attempting to provide services at prices that will maximize their profits. The dynamics of the market under certain assumptions about the availability of information, adequate numbers of buyers and sellers, and certain technological conditions of production assure that the satisfaction of private wants will be done efficiently.

However, there are at least two aspects of the private market solution that do not auger well for the provision of schooling in a democratic society. First, the private market enables those with higher income to obtain more and better goods and services than those with less income. To the degree that both the political requirements of a democracy and those of equal opportunity require a more homogeneous system of schools and one that does not create further disadvantages for those from poorer backgrounds, the dependence of the quality of schooling on family income is inappropriate. Second, the narrow quest for meeting private needs will not produce the public or social benefits of schooling, unless all families acknowledge and value the social

benefits above their more parochial interests. By pursuing their own tastes for schooling for their children, parents are likely to select schools which tend to reinforce their religious, political, racial and social class values, rather than seeking schools that are more ecumenical on such matters. Even if parents are deeply concerned about education for democracy, they are not likely to view a family decision for their child as having much impact on the overall social situation.

The market solution for choice does not take account of the external effects of such individual decisions. If individuals make narrow and parochial choices that simply reinforce their private tastes for schooling, then the broader requirements of a common experience for fulfilling the social, economic, and political functioning of the Nation will not be considered. The private decision process necessarily is limited to those concerns that are especially pertinent to individuals and families, not societies. If families choose schools for their children according to religious, racial, political and ethnic preferences, the result is likely to reinforce a large number of separate communities of interest with their own customs, values, political beliefs, social preferences, and even languages, and with no consensus on acceptable mechanisms to reconcile differences in a public or social forum.

Strictly private choices in schooling are less likely to foster a democratic nation than they are to balkanize the nation into fragmented communities with their own beliefs and practices and with enormous potential for intransigence on any attempt to reach a national or even a

regional or local accord on any contentious issue. Not only may each of these groups have different views on particular issues, but there may be no mutually acceptable mechanism for resolving disputes or for even establishing trust among different groups.

The very substance of the common school means that a political solution must be used to establish the nature of the common experience, rather than trusting it to private choices.[4] Such a solution requires that the alternatives and their social consequences be reviewed, and the broad outlines of what type of schooling is necessary be established. This type of decision cannot be achieved through a market mechanism. It must be undertaken through the political process of articulation, discussion, debate, coalition, compromise, and resolution and attempts an implementation with their unpredictable outcomes.

Tyack and Hansot (1981) make a persuasive case that in this respect, the public schools have provided a unique opportunity for widespread debate and participation not only about education, but about society itself. For the schools have provided a historical forum for a concrete discourse on what type of society we want, what types of experiences our children should be exposed to, and what we value as citizens. In contrast to other public and private institutions:

> ...public schools are everywhere close at hand and open to all children. They generate valuable debates over matters of immediate concern, and offer a potential for community of purpose that is unparalleled in our society (Tyack and Hansot 1981, p. 23).

How was this tension between the private preferences of citizens and the educational requirements of the larger society actually

resolved? Through political trial and error, a compromise was reached in which elements of choice and diversity were combined with uniformity into a system of public schools (Tyack and Hansot 1981). In the formation and transformation of the common school, the basic structures and curriculum were designed to provide what was thought of as a common experience, first within the communities and increasingly within the states (Tyack 1974). Further, compulsory attendance laws required that all of the young be subject to the schooling requirements (Landes and Solmon 1972). But, at the same time, there was ample provision for different schooling experiences to be obtained on the basis of a large number of choice factors including income, race, ethnic background, and other distinctions. These differences were created and structured by the very ways that schools were financed and governed.

First, families could choose private schools for their children if they had the resources. This meant that not only could individual families of financial means obtain such schooling for their children, but communities with common ties such as religion or politics could share community resources to send their children to schools that reproduced their religious values or ideologies. Such children simply did not need to participate in common schools and receive a democratic education.

Second, in the spirit of participatory democracy, the schools were considered to be local institutions that served local communities, despite their being established constitutionally by the states. But residential patterns were highly heterogeneous among the population with

respect to occupation, wealth, income, race, ethnic and religious background. Thus, democratic localism meant that hiring patterns, curriculum, religious practices, political content, and values represented rather heavily those of the surrounding community that was supporting the schools through their taxes.

Further, with reliance on the property tax, the available resources for common schools depended heavily on local wealth. This meant that wealthy communities were able to provide more educational resources and better education for their young than poorer communities. At the extreme, some poor farming communities were unable to marshal the resources to provide regular schooling for their children, and often their teachers were not qualified for the task. Even in the large cities with their diversity of neighborhoods, the practices of ward politics created disparate results in spite of the unified tax base for support of education. Various immigrant groups were able to obtain schools that stressed their native language and customs, and religious practices were also reflected in such neighborhood schools as well as in their hiring patterns (Tyack 1974, pp. 104-109). To the degree that the poorest groups lacked the political resources, it was the values of the majority that dominated the education of their children, often because the only teachers available were drawn from Yankee stock.

Only those persons with little power to dominate ward or local politics or to locate in residential areas with people like themselves, faced a situation in which the schools ignored their preferences or social position. Or, in communities that were impoverished by lack of a

tax base for support of the schools, even political control was not adequate to satisfy educational needs. Meager resources translated into large class sizes, low teacher salaries, and poor instructional materials and facilities. All of these problems faced blacks in the South and the border states. In addition to their racial isolation, by law they were also discriminated against in school resource allocation. As late as 1953-54 the official statistics showed a difference in current expenditure per pupil of 60 percent in favor of white students in the southern states, and the advantage was some 200 percent or more during the previous two decades (Levin 1979, p. 88).

In summary, the nineteenth century common school provided anything but a uniform and common education, even though there were many elements of structure and practice that were common in terms of the "official" curriculum and pedagogy. Within the common school there were different schooling experiences for various racial, ethnic, social, and religious groups. Differences in the availability of private schools, residential location, political power, race, and income were reflected to a great extent in schools that were heavily stratified. Thus, the conflict between the private and narrow interests of citizens on the one hand, and the social or public interest of the commonwealth on the other, was resolved through a compromise in which private differences were permitted in an overall system of common schools set out within a broad common structure and compulsory attendance requirement.

DEMOCRATIZING THE COMMON SCHOOL

The establishment of the common school in America was a signal accomplishment that should not be understated. The concept of a common preparation for a democratic society for all citizens and its actual implementation on a universal scale were unprecedented. Yet, it could not be unaffected by the prevailing ideology in capitalist America that individual liberty and choice were at the base of the society. Those with more wealth and privilege expected that their children would be treated accordingly by the educational system. Those with strong religious, political, and philosophical values expected that the schools would either reinforce or not contradict these values. Local control of schools within state systems provided a solution to the tensions between private and public goals by permitting substantial and systematic diversity within an overall system of common schools.

To anyone concerned with the democratic functions of schooling, the anomalies were clear. As the schools became consolidated at the beginning of the twentieth century, a clamor began to rise among reformers that the schools were not meeting their putative objectives. Michael Katz has stated that although the schools were "...universal, tax-supported, free, compulsory, bureaucratically arranged," they were also "...organized along both racial and social-class distinctions (Katz 1971, p. 106)." He stresses that there was a conflict between the notion of democratic localism and democracy in the larger sense. Under democratic localism, community differences in the available tax resources for funding education and in social class, race, religion, and

politics became transformed into similar differences in the public schools.

The educational history of the twentieth century was a history of attempted reforms to reduce some of the inequalities and diversities that threatened the reproduction of democratic values. Attacks were made on the legality of private schools, only to be ultimately resolved by the Pierce v. Society of Sisters decision in 1925, which ensured the freedom of citizens to send their children to schools outside the public system. In the cases of racial segregation, school finance, and religion in the public schools, the issues were contested somewhat later. But on these matters, the attacks ultimately culminated in important changes which provided -- at least theoretically -- for schools that were more nearly democratic in their operations. Indeed, I will argue that it is precisely this increase in uniformity that reduced the privileges of those who had previously been able to influence the nature and content of the schooling provided for their children in the direction of their narrow interests. As a result, the loss of such "choices" in the public schools has fueled the search for a new choice mechanism both within and outside of the public schools that we have seen in recent years.

1. School Finance

The inequalities deriving from a system of local educational finance were recognized even by the beginning of the twentieth century. Cubberley (1906) saw that differences in availability of local property wealth translated into differences in the ability to provide regular

schooling of a reasonable quality. The main thrust of school finance equalization was not to equalize educational offerings among local school districts within a state, but to make certain that a reasonable minimum educational offering or foundation could be provided (Coons, Clune, and Sugarman 1970, Chapter 2). The result was that states provided equalization aid only to the very poor school districts to meet the minimum educational requirement, ignoring inequalities above this bare minimum. Even with equalization aid, large inequalities persisted in educational expenditures within the states. Among the states, the inequalities were also substantial as the federal government abstained from any significant educational involvement.

At the extremes, poorer school districts were outspent by richer school districts by a factor of five to one or more in per pupil expenditure, often taxing themselves at higher rates on their meager tax bases to even obtain these low levels of educational support. However, constitutional challenges in the late sixties culminated in changes in many of the states in favor of a state financing system of fiscal neutrality so that the amount spent on a child's education was a function of the wealth of the state as a whole, rather than of any subdivision of the state (Coons, Clune, and Sugarman 1970; Wise 1968). In the seventies, the litigation and the legislative responses with respect to school finance reform were continuous (Lehne 1978; Pincus 1974); and by the late seventies and eighties, the fruits of school finance reform and equalization were being felt -- especially by the wealthier districts who were "squeezed" by the new arrangements.

In addition, it was common practice historically to spend less within school districts on schools attended by children from minority and low income backgrounds, even as late as the sixties (Baron 1971; Owen 1972; Sexton 1961; Thornblad 1966; Wilkerson 1960). But with the civil rights movement, the War on Poverty, and especially the passage of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which provided compensatory resources for the disadvantaged, these differences were scrutinized increasingly and political pressures were exerted for equalization (Browning and Costello 1974; Martin and McClure 1969).

The result of these changes was that living in the "right" neighborhood was no longer assurance of obtaining special privileges in terms of school spending. Moreover, the tendency for states to pass tax and expenditure limitation measures as in California and Massachusetts (Catterall and Thresher 1979; Bradbury, Ladd, and Christopherson 1982), and the general economic crisis of the seventies and eighties, placed restrictions on the growth of educational expenditures. Those school districts and neighborhoods that had been privy to the most luxurious school programs were most heavily impacted by both the tendency towards equalization and the slower growth rate of educational allocations. The result was that a venerable educational privilege of groups with higher income -- that of getting superior educational resources for their children within a public educational system -- had begun to diminish considerably by the seventies.

2. Religion and Politics in the Schools

Throughout most of their history, the public schools have been infused with religious practices reflecting those of the dominant, local school clientele (Blanshard 1963, Chapter 1; Dierenfield 1962, Chapter 2). Bible reading, religious instruction, religious pageantry, and other practices were exceedingly common, and in some areas the public schools were indistinguishable in curriculum and religious influences from parochial schools serving the same populations. As late as 1957, a national survey of schools found that two-thirds of school systems in the East, and three-fourths of them in the South conducted bible reading as an official activity in the curriculum (Dierenfield 1962, p. 51). Even this may understate the actual practice, since many such activities may have been voluntary on the part of school personnel in support of the religious backgrounds and preferences of their communities.

Only relatively recently (1962), did the Supreme Court declare that such activity violates the First Amendment, a declaration that has proven highly unpopular in many traditional religious communities and in Congress (Kirp and Yudof 1974, pp. 94-105; McCarthy 1981, pp. 384-388). But by this declaration, another major area of influence permitting diversity and the reflection of parochial preferences in education and educational values was frustrated. Today, there is increasing controversy and discussion of public action, including a potential constitutional amendment to reintroduce school prayer and other manifestations of religion into the public schools (McCarthy 1981); much of it stimulated by the emergence of fundamentalist groups such as the Moral Majority into national politics.

Democratic localism has also meant that the schools have reflected traditionally local political values, sometimes to a very substantial extent. School boards have tended to hire administrators who reflect the political values of the community, and the hiring of teachers, as well as evaluations of their teaching, have certainly reflected the values of the community. Further, most teachers are very cautious about presenting material or using books which might be considered politically or morally offensive, and when they have been incautious on such matters, the forces of censorship have often been quick to arise.

But, over time, states have tended increasingly to mandate the study of such controversial curricula as sex education and human relations on the basis of the social benefits of this knowledge in a democracy. Further, many states have textbook committees that proscribe books that are considered to be politically unbalanced or provide stereotypical views on sex or race (Keith 1981). Even local censorship of library materials has been challenged increasingly, contributing further to a seeming loss of control of communities to use the schools to reproduce their religious, political, and moral values through the public education of their children.

3. Racial Segregation

Prior to emancipation, few blacks received schooling of any sort. During the reconstruction period, schooling opportunities began to open up for blacks in those areas where public schools had been established. But, by the latter part of the nineteenth century, the separation of the races through Jim Crow legislation began to pervade all public

institutions of the South and the border states; practices that were enshrined in law by the well-known "separate but equal" doctrine set out in the Plessy v. Ferguson decision of 1893. Outside of the South, the tradition of democratic localism and housing discrimination also meant that blacks typically attended highly segregated schools. Indeed, the northern cities often gerrymandered attendance districts to keep blacks and whites in separate schools. Throughout the first half of this century, there was a substantial history of challenge of racial segregation, culminating in the decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in Brown v. Board of Education in 1954 (Kluger 1975). That decision declared that segregated schools are inherently unequal, and that when racial segregation results from state laws, those laws must be struck down (Kirp and Yudof 1974, pp. 281-304).

Although it was not until the late sixties that the decision was actually implemented, the impetus of the Brown decision was strengthened by the civil rights legislation of that decade (Levin 1979). Not only in the South, but in the North as well, the issue of racial segregation became a major policy issue (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1967). Initiatives to reduce the substantial racial segregation in the northern cities of the Nation were met with resistance to protect neighborhood schools and with white flight to the suburbs and to private schools (Orfield 1978). Yet, a major policy for permitting "choice" of the majority to go to public schools that reflected their values -- in this case, racial preference -- had finally been declared to be adverse to public interest. While the litigation and controversy on this issue

continue -- and schools in the north are more highly segregated by race than they were at the time of Brown -- the options of many whites to determine the racial composition of their schools has been curtailed (Kirp 1982).

4. Affirmative Educational Policies and Declining Enrollments

In most cases of school finance, religion, and race, there has been a major foreclosure of choice that had previously led to patterns of school expenditure, religious practices, and racial practices that reflected the social class and private preferences of local citizens. At the same time that the scope of educational policy was tightening around those who traditionally had substantial choice and influence regarding the education of their children, it was widening the range of possibilities for those who had lacked such options. With the great society came federal and state programs to provide compensatory educational resources to children from low income families; bilingual educational programs for those from non-English speaking homes; and an appropriate education in the least restricted environment for students with mental and physical handicaps.

In each of these cases, the schools began to provide appropriate services to groups that had lacked influence previously. Not only did such services tend to improve the educational chances of the affected children and their future economic chances, but it increased the competition for the most prestigious places in higher education and in later economic life between those who had been formerly neglected in the

schools and those who had been used to educational advantages. In the increasingly tight job market of the seventies (Rumberger 1981), this loss of advantage was compounded by a poor economy and affirmative action in higher education admissions and in some portions of the job market.

Finally, sex discrimination in school activities was prohibited, with a major impact on expanding athletic offerings for girls (Kirp and Yudof 1974, Chapter 5). Given these new demands on school budgets as well as the obligations to more nearly equalize school spending and provide resources for compensatory education, bilingual education, desegregation, education of the handicapped and to adjust to declining enrollments and inflation, schools had to eliminate other programs. Typically, cuts were made in sports programs, discretionary bussing, and various programs of cultural enrichment and student activities, although in some cases, the length of the school day and basic academic courses with small enrollments were also cut.

Taken together, these changes reduced educational services for those who had mattered traditionally and expanded the range of services to those who had been largely disenfranchised in school matters. As school seemed to matter more and more in the ultimate fortunes of youth, the most advantaged families faced increasing restrictions on their ability to influence the education of their children and provide educational advantages to them through the public schools. The private options that had been an integral part of democratic localism had been eroded by state and federal laws, new programs for expanding educational

opportunity for those whose educational needs were neglected traditionally, and a fiscal crisis brought on by declining enrollments and a faltering economy. Increasingly, the last major bastions of choice and privilege for the middle class majority have become the options of moving to a neighborhood with the types of students that one prefers as peers for one's children, or obtaining placement for offspring in tracks and ability groups that reflect social status and race. Given the high cost of housing and mortgages, even the ability to relocate has been foreclosed for many Americans who might have had this possibility in the past.

This is not to say that the schools have become fully democratic and equal. They are still segregated by race; differences in expenditures are evident both among and within states; ability grouping and tracking are often used to restrict opportunities rather than to expand them; and differences in social class, religious, and political orientations still persist. But most of these differences have been reduced substantially, and relative to the past there has been a major movement towards greater opportunities for students who were formerly neglected in conjunction with fewer opportunities to influence local public school practices by those who had formerly had the power to do so. The loss of influence in the system of public education has been highest among those with the greatest options in all other aspects of their lives because of their relatively higher incomes, social status, and political resources, as well as among those with strong political and religious views who have lost the ability to foster those views in

the schools. It is these groups that have become most frustrated and that are looking for ways to expand educational choice.

## CHOICE AND DEMOCRACY

There must always be a tension between common schooling for democratic participation and the availability of individual and family choice to meet narrower parochial and private goals. This does not mean that the quest for greater choice in education ought to be discouraged, for many choices are clearly consistent with a larger democratic framework. For example, few would argue that having some course and curriculum options or choosing teachers that seem to be most effective with one's children would be intrinsically antagonistic to democratic interests for the larger society. Further, the availability of special offerings in the arts, sciences, expressive skills, and athletics might be consistent with democratic schooling goals if the choices were open to all, and if the more basic democratic content and opportunities of schools were satisfied.

The issue really comes down to what is the proper domain for a common core of schooling experiences for all children, and what is the proper domain for choice? Where a particular decision affects only the individual student, choice among a range of individual options is most appropriate; however, where a particular educational decision has important implications for a collectivity of individuals or a social entity, a social consensus must be sought on the appropriate educational experience. In this section, I will address those questions by setting

out criteria for answering them. However, the very nature of such questions suggests that they must be answered through broad democratic processes and participation, rather than through the politics of expertise. Following a discussion of criteria that might be used to bear on such issues, I will suggest a variety of choice mechanisms that might be considered.

Common Core of Educational Experience

The basic premise from which I start is that public education in a democratic society must proceed from a common core of educational experiences for all children that will satisfy the requirements for a democratic education. Among the goals of the common core ought to be such basic needs as the provision of equal and appropriate educational opportunities for all children; exposure to ideas, values, political views, and individuals from backgrounds and cultures other than their own; fulfillment of basic requirements in a common language; familiarity with major technological issues; capability in numerical calculations and in reasoning; understanding of our system of government and rights and responsibilities of individuals; and access to training opportunities for careers. These are only suggested goals that arise from historical concerns for the Republic and some of the literature on the external benefits to society of schooling (Weisbrod 1964; Bowen 1978). Given that schools are organized to produce these outcomes and the social benefits that should ensue from the common core, there is surely a substantial domain for educational choice within such a

framework. It is only when individual and family choice in education undermines this common core and leads to social balkanization and privilege that it becomes injurious to the public interest.

If the basic goal of public education in a democratic society is to reproduce the common core so essential to the effective functioning of democracy, then any system of choice ought to be evaluated with respect to whether it contributes or supports such an objective or undermines it. Schemes that argue for private choice alone, tend to ignore the external benefits of schooling in a democratic society by assuming that the sum of individual choices will always lead to a desirable social result. In particular, voucher approaches tend to understate the contradiction between the attainment of a common core of educational benefits and fostering a system of unfettered educational choice.

For example, Friedman (1962) would limit the public interest to assuring that a minimal curriculum was offered (presumably a list of courses), with no comment on the actual content or teaching process. Coons and Sugarman (1978) agree that there is a compelling social interest in education, but they decry the lack of consensus on what it is. They suggest that we should let families make their own private choices, since families are more knowledgeable and concerned about their children than is the state. Although they are willing to build in some democratic protections into their voucher plan, one wonders how their conclusions emanating from the putative lack of consensus enables them to designate what these ought to be. Finally, E. G. West (1965) argues that there are few public or "neighborhood" benefits from schooling, in

which case, one must wonder why he would want the public treasury to pay for his system of educational vouchers.

It is the balance between individual or family choice and the public interest which must be emphasized. To ignore the public interest in favor of a consumer sovereignty of choice is to ignore the public purposes of schooling. To ignore the need for options in education is to assume that all clientele have similar needs and to risk the encrustation of schooling in the form of an unresponsive monopoly -- a charge which has been made especially for schools educating the urban poor and urban minorities (Downs 1970).

The challenge, then, is to establish a common core of educational experiences for all children, but to allow choice in how these are to be attained and in the functions of schooling beyond this core. To do this, it will be necessary to provide answers to a number of questions.

*<u>What are the proper domains for a common core</u>? The answer to this question will depend upon the contributions that we expect from our schools for reproducing a democratic society.[5] Such domains must be translated into educational practices that are consistent with the attainment of democratic social goals.

*<u>What are the proper domains for choice</u>? The answer to this question is a complement of the previous one. By asking it, we can validate both domains and practices according to whether they are primarily matters of social or individual importance in a democratic society.

*Who should determine the common core? Clearly the practice of democratic localism on such matters has violated many of the principles of democracy for a Republic. Yet, the insensitivity and rigidity of decisions made at federal and state levels tends to create inefficiency and stultification in a society characterized by great variations in the ability to meet regimented standards and by different educational needs among populations. Further, to the degree that representative forms of democracy find that representatives get captured by those special interest groups and lobbies with the greatest political and financial resources, the solution may be one where the common requirements support the demands of the most powerful constituencies rather than a broader base. Of course, all political solutions based upon parliamentary forms of democracy risk this result. While we should be wary of such a bias, we should note that even an imperfect democratic solution should be superior to alternatives that ignore the public interest.

*Who should have choice? Given a commitment to expanding choice options, one must ask who should have educational choices. Agents of choice include students, parents, communities, and other collectivities. Arguments can be made for each entity or for combinations of them, depending upon the domain of choice.

*What are the options for expanding choice? In addition to the market options of tuition tax credits and vouchers, there are numerous choice mechanisms that can be employed within the public schools. It is the purpose of the next section to explore these.

Public Choice Mechanisms

Hirschman (1970) has analyzed and contrasted two mechanisms for getting organizations to produce services efficiently and be responsive to their clientele, exit and voice. Exit refers to the act of shifting from one provider to another. When one is dissatisfied with one product and replaces it with another, or shifts purchases from one supplier to another, one is using the exit option. It is impersonal and effects of these shifts signal to producers important patterns of demand that must be responded to if the suppliers are to survive. In contrast, voice refers to the act of protest, discussion, negotiation, voting, and other forms of political or client participation to obtain one's goals. These acts tend to be more personal in nature, and often require individuals to work with other individuals or groups to achieve their ends.

On the surface, the notion of a common educational core would suggest the use of voice, while the notion of choice within that common core would suggest exit. In fact, this is an oversimplification, since voice can also be used to obtain choice as in the case of having one's child switched to a different class or given more homework assignments. As Hirschman emphasizes, the two mechanisms can be used to reinforce each other. If a supplier knows that a consumer might exit, it is likely that the supplier will be more responsive to protest. Under the existing organization of education, both mechanisms prevail. As we noted, voice can be used at the local level by individual parents to obtain services for their children, and it can also be used collectively in trying to affect local school and school district decisions. Exit

mechanisms are reflected in the option of migrating to other neighborhoods or school districts (Tiebout 1956), or shifting to private schools, or other private options, such as parental tutoring.

But, as noted above, these mechanisms may violate the common core of democratic schooling, and they may not offer a very wide range of options relative to others that can be provided within a common core. Further, they may be cumbersome, indirect, and costly as in the case of having to move one's residence to obtain better or more appropriate educational services. Thus, the overall goal ought to be to increase educational options for everyone, while retaining the basic democratic or common core of educational experiences. This means that all schools would be organized to as great a degree as possible to meet the various democratic requirements of schooling, and violations of these requirements would not be choice options.

1. More Responsive Administrative and Political Structures

One way of making schools more responsive is to create governance around smaller schooling units such as individual schools rather than school districts. The decentralization of governance would presumably place school decisions closer to the families affected by them and provide a greater impact of families on the schooling of their own children for those areas of education which do not impinge on the common core. Such matters as budgetary allocations, curriculum, hiring practices, and instructional materials could be influenced by local governing boards within the limits of the common core (Levin 1970). Specific models for school-site management and budgeting practices with

parental input have been developed in recent years (Garms, Guthrie, and Pierce 1978, pp. 278-294), and the legislature of the State of Florida has mandated this approach for its schools.

2. Open Enrollment

A fairly traditional method of increasing choice within school districts is the practice of open enrollment. Families would have the choice of sending their children to neighborhood schools or any other school with openings. To a certain degree, schools would compete for enrollments because they would lose resources as enrollments decline, and gain them as enrollments rise. Obviously, this option is likely to be most effective when there are meaningful choices and when the cost of transportation to other schools is low, such as in cities with well developed public transportation. The effectiveness of the approach for choice could be enhanced immeasurably by requiring school districts to permit inter-district transfers. That is, districts could compete for students, a particularly effective incentive at a time of declining enrollments. The district residence would be required to provide a transfer of funds equal to the "marginal" cost of educating an additional student in the receiving district. The state legislature would have to establish these practices by law as well as the overall definition of what should be included in marginal cost accounting.[6]

3. Schools of Choice[7]

A more elaborate method of developing choice is to provide a system of schools within a district that specialize in major areas of concern. Each school would attempt to meet the common core requirements, but

beyond that many would provide a particular orientation to meet parental demands. For example, specialization in "back-to-basics," art, music, science, cultural enrichment, and so on would be major candidates. Parents would be able to select schools of choice while knowing that the schools all pursued the democratic requirements of schooling.

4. Mini-Schools

A more expansive approach would be to establish mini-schools or several schools within each existing school plant, each mini-school offering a different alternative. In the large urban areas, both elementary and secondary schools are often large enough that their division into mini-schools for instructional purposes might also benefit educational efficiency, since studies have suggested educational deterioration in larger units (Chambers 1981). Each school plant would have a number of relatively independent instructional units from which the parent could choose, offering a variety of different educational orientations at a single site. Students from all mini-schools would cooperate in the sharing of resources, as well as offerings that were part of the common core.

The so-called voucher demonstration in Alum Rock, San Jose, California, was actually a public choice approach in which mini-schools and open enrollments were combined. Students could choose any mini-school among the demonstration schools (over 50 choices among 13 schools at one point), and resource flows would be guided by student choice to the particular schools whose enrollments were expanding. Fortunately, there were extensive evaluations of this approach, so a number of

perceptive insights can be gained on its design and implementation (Bridge and Blackman 1978; Weiler et al. 1974).

5. Mini-Vouchers

Mini-vouchers refer to the provision of certificates that students could use for a selected range of educational services. They fit rather well the separation of a common educational experience from a domain for individual and family choice in that the mini-vouchers would apply only to the areas of choice. For example, all students would be expected to have exposure to the common educational core. Beyond that, students and their families could choose among different types of educational offerings both within and outside of the public schools. These options might be limited to "enrichment" areas such as creative writing, computer programming, and specialized scientific and artistic subjects; or they might be used for ancillary educational services such as those for handicapped, disadvantaged, and bilingual students. In the latter case, state and federal funding for these purposes could be given to parents in the form of vouchers that could be applied to the costs of instruction at any approved public or private school. The mini-voucher approach would preserve the common educational experience while encouraging individual choice in those domains that were appropriate.

6. Private Contractors

A final way of establishing alternatives is to contract out various parts of the educational program beyond the common core to contractors who would compete with the public schools for students and would receive payment for results. There are at least two forms of this approach.

First, private contractors could be enlisted to provide instruction in specified subjects as alternatives for parents who were not satisfied with the progress of their children in regular classes (Coleman 1967). Second, private contractors could be hired to undertake instruction in those areas where the school system did not have a strong record of success or the obvious ability to improve matters (Lessinger 1970). To the degree that the contractors would be paid on the basis of improvement on specified tests or other measures of performance, there would be a strong incentive to produce results.

In general, this approach would seem to be most attractive for those students who have had the least success in existing schools in learning basic skills, particularly ones from minority and low income backgrounds. However, an experiment in the early seventies with performance contracting, which was sponsored by the federal government, did not show promising results (Gramlich and Koshel 1975). Whether the poor results were due to the hurried nature of the experimental planning or an intrinsic flaw in the contracting mechanism cannot be determined from the data. The results do suggest that the predictability of outcomes from educational contracting is not as straightforward as somme of its advocates have argued (Lessinger 1970).

Summary of Public Choice Mechanisms

Each of the choice mechanisms set out above is premised on choice within a common educational framework. Further, each requires substantial elaboration on the specific design and provisions for

implementation that are appropriate in any particular setting. Many of these issues have been discussed in the important set of studies produced by Rand on alternatives in American education (Bass 1978; Bridge and Blackman 1978; Thomas 1978), as well as in other places (Fantini 1973). Together, they offer a rich variety of possibilities for expanding educational choice within the public sector, while maintaining the integrity of a common educational experience for a democratic society.

Private Choice Mechanisms

In contrast with the public choice mechanisms, private choice mechanisms would increase educational choice by promoting alternatives to the public schools. The most prominent of these alternatives are educational vouchers and tuition tax credits. The former would provide for each child a certificate that could be applied to tuition costs at any school approved for such purposes by the state. Schools would compete for students and redeem the vouchers for cash with the state treasury. Different voucher approaches are characterized by diverse provisions regarding the size of vouchers, the degree of regulation of voucher schools, and the stringency of requirements for participation in a voucher arrangement (Levin 1980). Tuition tax credits refer to the arrangement whereby taxpayers can reduce their ultimate tax burden by a specified portion of the tuition that they pay for each child attending a private school. Again, there are different possibilities regarding tuition tax credit plans, including some that would grant "refunds" from

the treasury to parents whose tax liability was less than the credit, while others would not permit this feature.

In the context of educational choice, these approaches begin with the view that the most important educational commitment in a democratic society is that of permitting families to choose the kind of education that they want for their children (Coons and Sugarman 1978). To justify the use of public resources for meeting this commitment, voucher advocates like Friedman have argued that: "A stable and democratic society is impossible without a minimum degree of literacy on the part of most citizens, and without widespread acceptance of some common set of values" (Friedman 1962, p. 86). The challenge, then, is to build in features to the voucher or tuition tax credit plan that will assure the attainment of these social goals and justify the use of public support.

Different voucher approaches have set out different arrangements to protect the public interest, varying from the minimal protection in Friedman (1962) to the more elaborate regulations in the California Initiative of Coons and Sugarman (Levin 1980, pp. 126-132), to the most elaborate ones in the original plan that was to be used for the voucher experiment of the Office of Economic Opportunity (Center for the Study of Public Policy 1970). Typical areas of concern are the size of vouchers and the degree of permissable segregation. Friedman (1962) suggests a flat voucher with parents permitted to add-on to the voucher according to their income and tastes for education. Coons and Sugarman have argued for vouchers that would differ according to the educational needs of the child as well as permitting the schools to charge "...in a

manner accommodating family capacity to discharge burden" (Levin 1980, p. 130). The plan for the federal experiment, or the Christopher Jencks Plan, as it is known, would have provided larger or compensatory vouchers for children from lower income families with no provision for parental "add-ons."

The Friedman plan has no provision to minimize racial, political, religious, or social stratification. Both the Coons and Sugarman and Jencks plans would make sure that a certain portion of the enrollees in a school are selected by lottery, if there were more applications than places. However, neither plan is concerned if the narrow appeal of a school on religious, racial, political, social, or philosophical grounds results in a homogeneous student body along these dimensions, as long as such stratification is based upon a voluntary choice of the students and their families. This seems to be a fundamental problem with such "freedom of choice" approaches. A common educational experience requires that differences in family, home, and community values not dominate the schooling of children, and that children be exposed to ideas, values, cultures, and viewpoints that are not strict extensions of their family upbringing. How can democracy function if students are socialized at every stage into the narrow and parochial views of their families, without exposure to competing viewpoints and values?

The basic problem in reconciling the notion of a democratic education and a common educational experience with the market models is the difficulty of ensuring that private choices lead to the desired social consequence. Schools of choice, must base their appeal on the

ability of families to select educational settings for their children that mirror their own political, social, racial, and religious values. They stress as the highest priority the "efficient" satisfaction of private concerns. But a highly stratified set of schools, each pursuing its own narrow ends with a relatively homogeneous set of students, is not likely to provide the "widespread acceptance of some common set of values" sought by Friedman.

This can be seen more clearly when one considers that public choice approaches begin with the basic common educational experiences that are foundational to a democratic society and proceed to ways of providing choice within that framework. Private choice mechanisms begin with an attachment to a particular approach, for example, tuition tax credits or educational vouchers. They then proceed to graft on to these plans various regulations to try to meet what they perceive as the concerns of education in a democratic society. But the commitment to the private choice mechanism in itself, may be the stumbling block to a satisfactory solution that balances private and social interests, for it is the very mechanism of such choice that must lead to parochialism and stratification. This basic contradiction is exacerbated by the fact that the more regulations that are placed upon schools in such a framework to address democratic concerns, the more cumbersome and costly the overall apparatus and the less likely that there will be schools of choice in the sense advocated by the progenitors (Levin 1980, pp. 116-123). One cannot ensure both an unfettered or slightly fettered system of choice and a common educational experience at the same time.

At best these approaches might serve as appropriate candidates for students whom the public schools have been unable to serve well. If one argues that the public schools have not served adequately children from low income backgrounds and particularly those in the inner-city, then it is not clear that the goals of democratic education are being satisfied for these youngsters. Without basic literacy and other skills, the political, economic, and social participation of such populations must necessarily be problematic. In such a case, we ought to consider ways of at least providing basic skills to such youngsters through alternatives to the public schools, since many of the other democratic premises are already violated by existing segregation of such students in public schools. That is, inner-city youngsters may not be receiving either a "common educational experience" or achievements in basic skills for economic and social participation, and there seems to be little optimism that present patterns of school governance can alter this persistent result.

In this more limited situation, we might explore private choice mechanisms such as those suggested by Jencks (1966) and Sizer and Whitten (1968). Their proposals are premised on the view that the educational dilemmas of students from disadvantaged backgrounds represent a national emergency which must be addressed by a profound intervention. They believe that educational vouchers should be established for the children of the poor. However, it should be recognized that this is a very special case which cannot easily be justified for or generalized to the larger population.

## SUMMARY

This paper has made the following contentions. First, there is a need for a common educational core to satisfy the requirements for reproducing a democratic society. Second, although, historically the common schools were couched in the rhetoric of a common educational experience, democratic localism tended to undermine the commonality through a large number of anti-democratic practices. Third, recent decades have witnessed successful attacks on many of these practices, leading to greater equity and homogeneity of the public schools. Fourth, this success in overturning some of the aspects of schools that undermine democracy and creating greater uniformity in education, has stimulated new searches for greater choice and influence in education. Fifth, there are numerous public policy options that would increase parental and student choice within the common educational experience required to meet the social goals of schooling in a democratic society. Finally, there are intrinsic obstacles to using such private choice mechanisms as tuition tax credits and educational vouchers for addressing simultaneously both the social purposes of schooling and private educational choice.

The historic conflict between a common educational experience for democracy and the rights of individuals to free choice is intrinsic to a society with both democratic and capitalist roots and aspirations. There is no solution to this structural antagonism in the sense that any mere tinkering with institutions will eliminate that tension. It is

more realistic to suggest that some arrangements are better and some are worse. Arrangements that increase the range of private choices while maintaining the present version of the common educational core or that increase the effectiveness of the common educational core while maintaining present choices or that improve both domains are the solutions to be sought. The last of these clearly represents the most preferred case; a case that I believe can be attained.

Ultimately, it is necessary to talk about a political strategy for change. It is in this context that the value of the present debates and proposals for vouchers and tax credits can best be understood, for the historical inertia of school organizations is a testament to the difficulty of obtaining meaningful change in the absence of powerful external pressures from the society at large. In my view, it will be the threat of tuition tax credits and vouchers that will have the greatest stimulus on creating a system that increases meaningful public choices, while continuing to address a common educational experience for a democratic society. Without this challenge, it is highly doubtful that the expansion of educational choice would be so prominent in the policy discussions of the 1980s.

## FOOTNOTES

1. There exists a huge volume of literature on the historical transformations and their implications for education. For example, see Butts 1978, Bowles and Gintis 1976, Dreeben 1968, Gutman 1977: Chapter 1, Spring 1972, Tyack 1967 and 1974.

2. For a discussion on the distinctions between private and social goods and their consequences, see Musgrave and Musgrave 1976: Chapter 3.

3. An analysis of workplace control structures and their requirements of the worker is found in R. Edwards 1978. The connection between changes in the workplace and in the schools is reflected in Bowles and Gintis 1976: Chapters 6 and 7.

4. For a lucid and provocative comparison between market aspects of choice or "exit" and political aspects of choice or "voice," see Hirschman 1970.

5. It is beyond this essay to "define" the essential nature and ingredients of democracy and their educational requirements, other than sketching their broad outlines. However, it is important that I provide my own definition for purposes of clarifying my terms of reference. Democracy refers to a political, social and economic

process in which decisions affecting a social entity are made through participation of the members of that entity according to a specified and acceptable procedure that has -- in itself -- been determined democratically. The process may be that of direct participation, representation by elected officials, and/or various combinations of these modes of involvement. Democracy is often characterized by diverse views, goals, preferences, and strategies of individuals and groups as well as discussion, argumentation, disagreement, and compromise among them. Democracy is a process rather than an outcome. It is never perfect or static, but it is always fluid and mobile and in the process of becoming rather than existing in some final and pure form. The literature on democratic theory and democracy is extensive. For example, see Dahl 1956, Mansbridge 1980, Pateman 1970, Sartori 1962, Schumpeter 1942, and Thompson 1970.

6. Marginal costs should be considerably lower than average costs at a time of declining enrollments for schools of destination. That is, under-utilized facilities and tenured personnel can be utilized more fully without a substantial effect on increasing overall costs. However, this also poses a dilemma for the "sending" district in that its average costs will rise considerably as it loses enrollment. However, the costs of losing students should serve as a strong incentive for building programs to maintain enrollments.

7. For details on how some school districts have created alternatives of this sort, see Bass 1978 and Thomas 1978.

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